Special Information Bulletin

L E O N T H O M A S

Writing of Leon Thomas' singing on Pharaoh Sanders' Karma, Will Smith in Jazz & Pop Magazine observed: "The voice projection of the lyrics is good and full, and leads to a wordless yodel sounding not unlike an American Indian call - the moaning of spirits known and unknown."

Smith had gotten to the essence of Leon Thomas' approach to expanding the capacities of the voice in the new music. Thomas is searching as far into himself as he can go for spirits known and unknown and is creating new dimensions of vocal expressiveness to bring these spirits - these feelings - into the experience of others.

Although Thomas has been a professional for a long time and has recorded with Count Basie and Mary Lou Williams - as well as with Pharaoh Sanders - his first album under his own name, with himself at its core, did not come into being until Bob Thiele recorded him for Flying Dutchman.

Before getting to Thomas' present vocal goals and imperatives, it's instructive to trace his jazz odyssey. Since he is surely at the edge of making his own substantial impact, it's useful to look into his own roots.

Leon Thomas was born in East St. Louis, Illinois, on October 4, 1937. Though his parents were not musicians, music was a vital part of the domestic ambience. Both sang in church choirs, and both liked to listen to recordings. "There were a lot of the old things around," Leon remembers. "Recordings going all the way back to Blind Lemon Jefferson."

As a boy, Leon's primary call, so he felt then, was to athletics. Proficient in baseball, basketball and track, he saw himself in the future as a professional on the diamond or the courts. But he always liked to sing too - with the school choir, with friends, by himself.

One Sunday afternoon, while he was in the tenth grade, Thomas went into a club for some cokes and for the music. The fiery center of the proceedings was Armando Peraza, and eventually the youngster found himself on stand, joining in on conga drum and bongos. A local musician told Peraza, "You can beat this kid on bongos, but not on singing." Young Thomas was encouraged to return the next week to sing.

On stand then were Jimmy Forrest and Grant Green. Thomas sat in, this time as a vocalist, and among the intrigued listeners was disc jockey Spider Burke who had a weekly late afternoon radio show on which he played and showcased "live" performances. Burke invited Thomas to the station, and the singer's unique, advanced method of scat singing - more fluid and faster than the traditional approach to jazz vocalese - quickly won him a substantial local following.

He was 16, and he was beginning to have different thoughts about his vocation. "I had to learn a new song a week," Leon says, "since I was on the air regularly and I'd also become a fixture at a local club. I worked with lots of different groups there, including Green and Forrest, and the Trio Tres Bien - before they became a quartet."

At the time, his influences included Billy Eckstine, Arthur Prysock, and B. B. King. ("My mother liked B. B., and we had his records around.") Then his younger brother brought home a record on which Joe Carroll, a skillful scat singer, performed with Dizzy Gillespie. "I found out," says Leon, "that I could do what Carroll was doing, but there was also that little extra thing that was my own. I wasn't sure what it was until later when I began hearing horn players like Coltrane."

Thomas enlarged his audience, winning contests, coming in third in a competition for the whole St. Louis Metropolitan area. That same summer, a key event happened in terms of his development. Miles Davis was due at the Peacock Alley, and since Miles was a home town boy, there was even more anticipation than would be expected in any case. The local connoisseurs were also looking forward to hearing Sonny Rollins with Miles, but Sonny had just gone on his first self-imposed sabbatical, and John Coltrane was sent for from New York.

"At first," Leon recalls, "nobody dug what Trane was doing. My brother did though. He said,'Hey, he's doing on the horn what you've been trying to do with your voice!' And he was right. Trane was running all those changes, as was I, and he was also into something else - new ways of using sound to get deeper expression. I heard him every night. I couldn't believe it, man, what he was doing. I was also inspired by the rhythm section Miles had then - Philly Joe Jones, Red Garland, and Paul Chambers. Especially Paul because he was so young. It was an inspiration to see him up there with Miles and he not being too much older than I was."

After being graduated from high school, Leon went to Tennessee State on a music and dramatic scholarship. "But I hadn't given up sports," he emphasizes. "I also went out for the track team." The pull of music at Tennessee State was strong, however. Les Spann was there doing graduate work. Also working around campus were Hank Crawford, Milton Turner (a Ray Charles veteran) and Lewis Smith (who has been with Horace Silver). "Those guys began to encourage me," Leon observes, "and my second year at Tennessee State was spent mostly on the road with a little group formed at the school. We worked Nashville, Kentucky, Alabama, and other places in that general area. When Hank left to join Ray Charles, the group broke up, and I went to work at the New Era Club in Nashville where I'd appeared from time to time before."

A number of musicians and singers passing through told Leon he ought to go to New York - that was the proving ground. "But Faye Adams," says Leon, "was the only one who really set some things up for me." On a lead from Faye, he came to New York in September, 1958, to record for RCA Victor. The album was cut the next month but was not released. "I was hanging around the Shaw booking agency," Leon adds, "and about ready to give up. But one day a slot was open at the Apollo when Austin Cromer was incapacitated. So there I was, with a chance to go on the same bill with Dakota Staton, an all-star big band led by Art Blakey, Ahmad Jamal, and Nipsey Russell. The agency wanted to know if I had arrangements. I told them I had, and thanks to Melba Liston working from Tuesday to Thursday, I did have some charts in time for rehearsal."

On opening day, Friday, Leon reached the demanding Apollo audiences so resoundingly that he kept being called back for encores. Blakey took a quintet from his big band on the road after that week at the Apollo, and Leon went along with them. "It was great experience," he points out, "and I kept meeting cats everywhere."

By 1960, when the black student movement for civil rights was emerging in the South, Leon decided to check things out back in Nashville at Tennessee State. "I stayed around a while," Leon says, "and got a gig in a local club. Count Basie came down for a spring dance, heard me, and told me to look him up if I ever came back to New York. Well, that next week, I was backstage at the Apollo. I ran into Joe Williams, who remembered me from that week I'd played at the theatre, and Joe told me he was getting ready to leave Basie." At Williams' suggestion, Leon called the Count, who gave him work at his Harlem club weekends until Williams did leave the band. Meanwhile, Leon was also working at Cafe Wha in the Village with Booker Ervin, Richard Davis and Jaki Byard.

Finally, in January, 1961, young Leon Thomas was in the big leagues - singing with Basie. It only lasted a month because he had to go into the Army. "But I was in only six months, and then I worked around, getting myself together, until joining Basie again in 1963. I stayed with him for two years."

After that period, Leon broadened his experience through work with Randy Weston, Roland Kirk, Benny Powell, Joe Newman, and Tony Scott. The latter was at The Dom in the East Village for a considerable time, and it was here that Leon was first heard by Archie Shepp and Pharaoh Sanders. "They used to come down on weekends," Leon notes, "and we got into some wild musical things."

There was also an important learning experience for Leon in Los Angeles for four months in 1967. "I worked with members of U.G.M.A.A. - Underground Musicians and Artists Association. It was an extraordinary musical experience for me. They were really into the avant-garde, into freedom-type music. And I began to hear all kinds of possibilities as I got rid of a lot of prejudices I had about the limitations of the voice. We were like a big Sun Ra family, and I learned a great deal from Horace Tapscott, who played piano, Black Arthur, an alto player, Lester Robinson, who's on trombone with Gerald Wilson, and Leroy Brooks, a drummer. Leroy recently died;

he was the Elvin Jones of this moment!"

Having learned to "stretch in all directions" while in Los Angeles, Leon came back to New York and in 1968 formed a natural alliance with Pharaoh Sanders with whom he has worked since, along with his own free-lance assignments.

Asked to describe the first album of his own(SPIRITS KNOWN AND UNKNOWN - FD10115)after all these years of learning and exploring, Leon begins by pointing out that "some of it has to do with what you could call social commentary. It's a big task, but I'm going to try to help bring some order, some perspective into what's happening all around us now. And then part of it is basic jazz material. I like to write lyrics to originals by Horace Silver, Monk and Trane."

"But through everything I do now," Thomas emphasizes, "there's my conviction that you have to be more than an entertainer. It just doesn't make any sense pretending nothing else is happening outside of wherever it is you're performing. But that doesn't mean a creative artist has to reflect chaos and disorder. It's the other way around. A lot of stuff is coming up in music that has nothing to do with art, but an artist can try to order what's going on while commenting on it."

The album also focuses on Thomas' further conviction that the time has come for the expansion of the voice in the new music. "In a way," he says, "things have come full circle. At the very beginning of all music, there was the voice. Now we're getting back to the importance of that primary human instrument. The voice can be most evocative of all instruments; but as I hear things, for that to happen requires going into the most ancient forms of musical expression - what the pygmies and others sing in Africa; Indian ragas; music of the Himalayas. If you listen, although some people regard these people as 'primitives,' what they're doing is really very complex and subtle but at the same time it's also a very free expression of the voice.

"They used to call me 'Mr. Modern,' " Leon smiles, "when I was doing that radio show at home. But I contend that to be really into what is modern, you have to simultaneously go as far back as you can. And in the process, as you liberate the voice, you find the voice can play a most important role in terms of talking about what's going on. People will listen to singing where they won't pay much attention to a speech. But to get them to listen, you really have to get at their feelings, and that means getting at your own.

"I call what I do 'egoless', " Leon explains, "because it goes into the unconscious. It can be a moan or a cry or a tear. It can be a great big sigh - but under control. The thing is, however, not to be limited to what you consciously think or feel - you have to let it all well up. I have no label for what I'm doing; I guess there isn't any name yet for what it is."

Leon's second album is THE LEON THOMAS ALBUM (FD 10132). Leon appears on four other albums, as well, with Johnny Hodges (THREE SHADES OF BLUE - FD 10120), LOUIS ARMSTRONG AND HIS FRIENDS (AM 12009), SUPER BLACK BLUES #2 (BT 29009) and with H. RAP BROWN (FD 10136).

The third album by Leon, recorded live in Berlin (LEON THOMAS IN BERLIN - FD 10142), is already on the best selling charts.

In addition to critical acclaim, Leon is at long last receiving due recognition from the public. Leon was voted Number 1 Male Singer in Down Beat's 1970 Readers Poll, Number 1 Male Singer in Jazz Wereld (Holland), Number 1 Male Singer in Jazz Podium (Germany), Number 1 Male Singer Melody Maker (England) and in the International Critics Poll 1970 of Jazz & Pop, he was voted Best Jazz Vocalist.

So Leon Thomas, caring less about labels than about origins - of sound, of his own feelings - is building on all the years of listening and traveling and singing to create his own unmistakeable sound and style. And he's also doing a lot of living. He's been married since 1962 to a girl, Lorraine, he met at Tennessee State, and he hasn't lost his passion for sports. "I still play basketball all the time," he says, "with some of the baddest cats you can find. On September 19, 1970, Amos Leon Thomas, III - a Virgo - was born. He is called by the nickname of "TUT" since he has now taken over the "Kingly" 'reign' of the Thomas household. Leon and Lorraine hope that this is the beginning of a large family. With the new addition, Leon remarked, "I really have to get out there and earn some bread for the new member."

After successful engagements at the Montreux Jazz Festival, Switzerland; Berlin Jazz Festival, W. Germany; Apollo Club, Paris and the Ronnie Scott Club, London, Leon has been appearing at colleges and night clubs throughout the United States. Successful appearances include the now defunct and historical Fillmore East, Stonybrook University, Coppin State College, Slugs (NYC), Canisius College (Buffalo), Bowling Green University (Ohio), The Birdcage (Atlanta), Club Baron (Harlem,U.S.A.), University of Dayton (Ohio), Queens College (NY), Lennies on the Turnpike (Boston), Both/And Club (San Francisco) and his own Town Hall Concert (NY) to name a very few.

But at the focus of the prodigious energy of Leon Thomas, 6'2", with the stamina of an athlete and the drive of a creator, is his insistence that "we're into a new period. So far the horns have been in the forefront in terms of exploring the new dimensions of sound and expression. But no one has been nearly adventurous enough - for this time - with the possibilities of the voice. I feel I'm into that, and I feel it can be unusually therapeutic, for the listener as well as for the singer." Leon has finally arrived. He is now getting to the ears of the people and they dig what Leon is putting down.

Right on!!!

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